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Baccalaureate Address, 2019

May 25, 2019

Good afternoon, and welcome to your penultimate ritual at Middlebury. As I look at all that you have done since you began here, there is no doubt in my mind that you are fully prepared to take on the challenges of the world. Seated in front of me right now, you are the 644 members of the Class of 2019, who have come to us from 42 different states and 69 different countries. Together and as individuals, you have already accomplished what most people couldn't dream of doing in a lifetime.

Let me offer you some numbers as evidence. 132 of you completed joint or dual majors. Thirty-eight of you majored in a foreign language, 82 attended the summer Language Schools, six of you studied abroad for the summer, 369 of you went abroad for a semester, 36 of you for a year, to 38 different countries, studying in another language.

You have competed in athletics. Among you are three individual NCAA champions. You have been part of 17 NESCAC championship teams and five NCAA champion teams—and that may be more after this weekend. Women's lacrosse is playing in the NCAA Final Four for the third time in four years and we just got word fifteen minutes ago that they won in the semi-finals against Wesleyan, 16-8! We will wish them well in the championship game tomorrow. Seven members of the Class of 2019 are competing in the NCAA Division III Championships Outdoor Track and Field Championships. Beyond varsity athletics, you've played a dozen club sports, including men's and women's Ultimate Frisbee, which once again competed in the Division III National Championships just last week. The women made it to the quarter-finals, and the men won their second national D3 title.

You have created connections through community service in Addison County and beyond. Sixty-five of you participated in a Middlebury Alternative Break trip; 13 of you led your fellow classmates on week-long service trips over February break to explore urban food systems in San Francisco, youth education and inequality in St. Louis, and environmental restoration in Costa Rica.

Fifty of you received Cross-Cultural Community Service Fund grants that supported your projects in international community service, advocacy, and activism in places like Serbia, Ghana, Nicaragua, China, and England. Twenty-two of you are current Community Friends mentors who have spent two hours or more each week with an elementary-age child in Addison County—and seven of you have been paired with the same child for all four years. Thirteen members of the class of 2019 served in Privilege & Poverty summer internships: 7 with local organizations, 6 with national placements, and two of you completed the full requirements of the Privilege & Poverty Academic Cluster, to graduate as P&P Scholars. Eight of you were DREAM mentors; thirteen of you collaborated with Vermont schoolteachers to help teach world languages.

Then there's what you've accomplished as individuals and in small groups. You helped to organize Nocturne, an all-night campus art festival; you created a new line of women's outdoor pants. You conducted research on the interaction between computers and music; and on *shimenawa*, the sacred ropes used in Shinto ceremonies; and on social capital and albinism in African populations. You helped curate museum exhibitions, performed choral music in the Baltic States, theater as part of a professional company in New York City, and jazz in our concert hall.

And you challenged us, helping us reach our goal of carbon neutrality; increasing campus diversity; reiterating our support of our DACA and undocumented students; broadening our understanding of accessibility and of gender identification and inclusivity; expanding the kinds of conversations we are having on campus; reconfiguring our curriculum.

You also helped us achieve one of the most remarkable things in this community's history—Energy 2028. The collaboration of students, faculty, staff, and trustees to create an Energy plan that will make our campus powered by 100% renewable energy in 2028. We have already begun plans to build a solar field to help with that. This winter, we will begin to build a bio-digester using food and manure that will do many things at once. It will be the first of its kind to provide fuel directly to a campus community. It will help decrease the phosphorous levels in Lake Champlain. It will help with our food waste, and allow a local farm to thrive again. Our endowment will be fully divested of fossil fuels in 10-15 years. Patient, persistent, student activism and work over many years drove all of that. You kept with it, and your success has created a real milestone for all of Middlebury.

I mention Energy 2028 because it is a wonderful example of what I am about to charge you to do. I rarely charge members of a class to go out and do something specific. I usually charge them to go and find their life's work—however complex, however simple. To find the internal voices that spur them on and to heed the external ones that nurture and inspire them. And you should do that. All of you. All the time. You should find your question—the one question that only you can ask—the question that you will never get tired of asking and you'll never know the answer to.

There is nothing more important than finding your question. But there is one question that **all** of us should be asking: how do we care for our environment? It is our collective question. The one question we should never stop asking. The one we must ask on behalf of the world. Bill McKibben said of you this past year that you are the most important generation of our times. You didn't ask for that status. But, since earlier generations have failed to address climate change, the fate of the earth lies in your hands.

So today, I **am** going to ask you to do something specific. To carry on a particular legacy. I am going to ask you to do what you did in helping build Energy 2028: use your education to protect the environment. If we have educated you in science, you will understand scientific consensus that gives us ten to fifteen years to address the carbon damage. If you have been educated as social scientists, you will know the large-scale displacement of people due to climate conditions. If you have been educated as humanists, you will know grief—the loss of plant and animal species, indeed, entire landscapes, that is accelerating all around us. If you have been educated as artists, you know the vibrant color of life in a coral reef.

You can still be a lawyer, or a financial analyst, or biologist, or a writer or a traveler or an educator. But, as you do all those other things, make your profession work on behalf of the planet. Because you have learned biology. Policy. Poetry. Painting. Ethics. Astrophysics. Everything you have learned here, you can put to use on behalf of the environment.

Some of you might not find this hard because you are already embarking on environmental careers. Others of you might be anxious because I have asked you to do something extra. “How do I do this? I’m set for graduate school in math. I’m headed to Bank of America. I’m going to be a carpenter in New Hampshire,” you’re thinking.

In answer, I will say something very simple: keep the lessons you have learned from this landscape with you. You have all taken walks and seen the shadow of the mountains in the moonlight. You have crossed pastures where the swamps and stubble are heavy and unexpected. You have swum in lakes bluer and colder than you ever thought possible. You have watched trees on campus turn a shade of red that has made you weep.

Every landscape has lessons to teach. This New England landscape is no different. Take them with you. Let me turn to the words of your literal Elder—emeritus professor and renowned environmental writer, John Elder. In his interview with Leath Tonino in 2013, they were discussing the late environmentalist Roger Deakin, who was often described as an “explorer of the undiscovered country of the nearby.”

John Elder goes on to elaborate on why that is also a good description of his own work. He has become an explorer of the undiscovered country of the nearby because of the particular power of the New England landscape and how close it all seems. He writes of his life in Bristol, Vermont, the town next door, where some of you have gone to get a cup of coffee or to swim:

I can walk out my back door and see bear tracks in the mud. I can climb the little hog back ridge east of the village and get lost every time. It’s hard to know what your elevation is in those thick forests. You don’t have much of a view. But I never worry about starving to death, because sooner or later I can spot Lake Champlain and figure out which way West is. I’ve often wandered for two or three hours in those woods but I tend not to miss supper.

So too, you can be that kind of explorer of the landscape—wherever you find yourselves. As you do something for the environment, as you work on this massive challenge on behalf of the planet and the human race, think about doing so by learning about and working on behalf of the undiscovered country of the nearby.

By taking lessons from this landscape, right here, Elder learned that he was able to discover more and more, closer and closer to home. I believe you can too. Work in your town, your neighborhood, your house, your room, your cellar, under your sink. There is no place too small to start working. That is not because we can check off some environmental box if you do something like buy better cleaning solution. It’s because the only way that we can accomplish something like healing the planet on such a massive scale is for each of us to understand the undiscovered country of the nearby. As you do so, you will bring this New England landscape with you. You will use the four years of your time here—the mountains, trees, grasses, bushes, blooms—to imagine something new and different for all of us.

Let me be even more specific about what you might have learned from this landscape. For Elder, there is a thickness and intricacy to the Vermont mountains—what one student of his from the vaster landscapes of the West called “living in a teacup.” In that teacup, there is the density of the forest floor, with layers of history that tell of the clear cutting done by those of who built homes here last century, and the century before that. There are the old stones that they placed, now barely visible and that now seem like part of the ground. There is the history of violence, too, as those who settled here displaced the Abenaki people who lived in these hills and fished in these waters. That, too, is sometimes barely visible, but so much a part of our legacy, the history we inherit. Thickness. Intricacy. These are two things you have learned from the New England landscape during your four years here.

You have also learned messiness. When Elder first moved here from the west and started taking walks in the New England woods, he found it profoundly messy. “There are twigs and bushes and decomposing logs everywhere. I had to lift my feet to move through it all.” Elder tells us, “Messiness helps us to avoid simplistic thinking. Instead of wanting everything neat and smooth and clear, we remember that a healthy forest has all stages of growth in it.” Messiness helps us to avoid simplistic thinking. Your generation, your class, you—you are inheriting a messier, more complex world than has ever existed before. That means that you cannot afford the luxury of simplistic thinking. In order to heal our planet, you need to embrace the complexity, and avoid that longing—so deep within all of us—for there to be a neat, and smooth, and clean, and clear solution.

Everything you do must be at least complex enough to take both humanity and nature into account—as the Robinson Jeffers poem implies, you need to “love the earth and not humanity apart from that.” You are tasked, more than any other generation, to love both earth and humanity. And to find a new relationship between them.

Middlebury graduates: Historians, geologists, artists, physicists, and so many more. You are extraordinary young people with drive, and energy, and courage. If Middlebury has done its work, then you will thrive and, in doing so, help our planet to thrive. Go and explore the undiscovered country nearby. Embrace its complexity and its profoundly messy challenges. Go with the Vermont landscape inside you. That landscape has taught you well, if you take the time to listen to it. You can, and must, heal the world. We are so very proud. Congratulations!

Office of the President

Old Chapel
9 Old Chapel Road
Middlebury College
Middlebury, VT 05753
802.443.5400
president@middlebury.edu